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Kidz Bop, "Tweens," and childhood music consumption

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The last several years have seen the consolidation of a new marketing category in the entertainment industry—"tweens," a group that before it was so prominently and successfully cultivated as a market demographic would have been called "preteens." The top-selling album of 2006 was the soundtrack to the Disney Channel movie *High School Musical*, a "tween"-driven phenomenon. The following year, two more Disney Channel acts, Hannah Montana and the Jonas Brothers, emerged as top acts in the industry. Below the radar of Disney Channel's meteoric successes, the entertainment company Razor & Tie is the workhorse in this market, regularly releasing albums of the prominent brand Kidz Bop, which sells mainstream popular music partially digested for children's consumption. Kidz Bop markets CD compilations of top-forty hits for preteens, rerecorded with groups of children singing along to the choruses and hooks, occasionally interjecting "yeah!" and "wooh!" In addition to being the top selling children's artist in the four years through 2006 (recently overtaken by Disney acts), Kidz Bop represents vibrant growth in a music industry troubled by diminished profits. The tenth volume of Kidz Bop debuted in August of 2006 at #3 in the all-around Billboard album sales charts, and Kidz Bop volume 9 entered the charts in February 2006 as the second best-selling album in the country.

In this paper I look back a couple years to examine a recording from volume 8, which in August 2005 became the first Kidz Bop album to crack the Billboard Top 10, following on the heels of Kidz Bop 7, which itself broke sales records for children's music and was certified gold. Kelly Clarkson's 2005 grammy-winning hit, "Since U Been Gone," was the first song for which Kidz Bop produced a stand-alone music video. As products whose marketing and consumption help define the boundaries of a particular category of childhood, this video and recording provide insight into the social construction of "tweens" as a category of commercial and age-based identity in the contemporary United States (Cook and Kaiser 2004). Kidz Bop's "Since U Been Gone" portrays and enacts a set of relationships between pre-adolescence and mainstream popular culture. These relations foreground tweens' peripherality from adult popular culture while developing settings for children to legitimately enact adult habits of performance and consumption—what Cook and Kaiser call "anticipatory enculturation" (2004:206). Cook and Kaiser identify ambiguity, especially with regard to representations of childhood sexuality, as central to the construction of "tween" identity in the children's clothing industry. I follow them in attending to the contradictions implicit in Kidz Bop's portrayals of tween music consumption and performance.

Kidz Bop neatly fits a model of US popular culture in the last quarter-century that emphasizes the layering, recycling, and remixing of previous forms in new configurations. With hip-hop sampling and what Simon Reynolds calls "record-collection rock" (2004) as the musical models, such practices have been identified in arenas as diverse as MUZAK, karaoke, TV song contests, and impersonations (Sterne 1997; Oakes 2004). As it repackages and redistributes songs that already have a commercial life in the popular media, Kidz Bop is arguably one more example of a pervasive practice of "secondary consumption." However conventional, Kidz Bop's repackaging is involved in the culturally specific constitution of an age- and consumption-based category of individuals.

Kidz Bop music helps to define the boundaries, but also the intersections, between public and private spaces, and local and popular culture. Childhood is a category that embodies an ideological opposition between local domesticity and public commerce, in which childhood remains a privileged site as yet unalienated by capitalism (Stephens 1995). Kidz Bop carefully negotiates this charged ideological field, bringing children more visibly into public commerce by reinforcing the ideological constructions of public and private, adult and child, commercial and cultural, while delicately penetrating their boundaries.

The Kidz Bop brand is derivative of instances of "mainstream" popular culture. Its compilations are modeled on *Now That's What I Call Music*, a series that collects the bestselling recent songs in regularly released compilations. *Now That's What I Call Music* is now in its 28th US volume, and has largely replaced the market for singles in the US. Kidz Bop's album covers update the bright colors of *Now That's What I Call Music* with the clean lines and solid colors that signify "childhood," and the song lists for the different series overlap (in 2006, for instance, *Kidz Bop 10* and *Now That's What I Call Music 22* both included Nickelback's "Savin' Me," Daniel Powter's "Bad Day," and Rihanna's "S.O.S.>").

Kidz Bop in most cases rerecords a new lead vocal track with a singer selected to sound as close as possible to the original star, but the focus of Kidz Bop recordings is the addition of a chorus of children to the arrangements. The individual lead parts are always performed by professional adult singers. The child singers are intentionally amateurs, and they sing along as impromptu, enthusiastic participants. The addition of a chorus of untrained children "singing along" with a professional lead in effect inscribes the role of audience in the Kidz Bop recordings.

Kidz Bop markets itself as "kid friendly music," filling a niche for children who are exposed to hit songs at school, on the radio, on television, or through the Internet, but whose parents are uncomfortable purchasing music for their children that includes heightened language or sexuality. An undercurrent of danger in popular culture (and in discourses about childhood and modernity generally) helps Kidz Bop market its brand. One executive is quoted as wanting to have pop "be safe for [kids], and for parents to be comfortable that it's not as dangerous as everything that's on the radio" (McCarthy 2006). Kidz Bop label Razor & Tie describes its target age group as "kids who have outgrown Elmo but are not quite ready for Eminem" (Pang 2006), citing Eminem as a widely recognized figure in recent moral panics about popular music's influence on children.

Kidz Bop's main intervention in making popular music safe for kids is to avoid songs whose lyrics and subject matter are unresolvably explicit. Certain words—"hell," "retarded"—are removed, so in the Ciara song, "1, 2 step," the line "So retarded, top charted, ever since the day I started" is rewritten insensibly as "credit-carded, top charted . . .," while the suggestive "Strut my stuff and yes I flaunt it, goodies make the boys jump on it" remains unchanged (McCarthy 2006). It's worth noting, here, that sexually suggestive rhymes, and verse that thematizes love, marriage, sex, and pregnancy are common in children's singing and clapping games, such as the lines documented by Elizabeth Grugeon (2001:100): "I jumped in the lake and swallowed a snake / And came up with a bellyache" or "Boys have got the muscles / Teachers got the brains / Girls have got the sexy legs / And here we go again." But Kidz Bop also repeats unchanged remarkable lyrics such as those on the recording of Modest Mouse's "Float On," in which a chorus of enthusiastic tweens sings along to lyrics that problematically limn issues of race and criminality: "I backed my car into a cop car the other day," and "a big jamaican took every last dime with that scam." Because the songs are only minimally altered to make them suitable for children, it appears that the addition of amateur children's voices almost single-handedly accomplishes the transformation from potentially harmful popular culture to "kid friendly music."

In this way, Kidz Bop sells to parents and children a setting for and a vision of children's legitimate participation in popular culture. This is a feat accomplished via elegant contradiction, as the Kidz Bop brand legitimates tween consumption while simultaneously reinforcing anxieties about the effects of capitalist culture on the privileged spaces of childhood.

The video for "Since U Been Gone" provides finer-grained representations of legitimate tween consumption, which outlines a trajectory of imagination, desire, and performance along a vector of media and mediation. It centers on a girl in her bedroom singing into a hairbrush microphone. With her younger brother's assistance, she performs in front of a home video camera, backed by a band of stuffed animals. A portable CD player on the bed plays what is presumably the original Kelly Clarkson track, with which the

sister sings along. The presence of the CD player next to the sister situates Kelly Clarkson, not Kidz Bop, as the object of musical desire, confirming what is implicit in the recordings, that Kidz Bop inscribes at its center its own secondary relation to "original," "adult" music. As the song builds toward the chorus, the video cuts to drawings of the stuffed animal "band members" made by the younger brother. The drawings animate, and at the chorus the video cuts to a (widescreen) fantasy of the sister on stage in a dimly lit nightclub performing for a crowd of children a few years younger than she. The band of stuffed animals are now full-sized, costumed performers. The audience of younger children assumes the role of Kidz Bop chorus, and the sister fantastically breaks through from play performance to the real thing. The Internet, and video-sharing websites such as YouTube (and KidzBop.com is pushing hard to capture the children's share of that market) is a near-explicit presence here, where the change in aspect ratio articulates a switch from home to fantasy, and presumably from the mundane domesticity caught by the camera to the mediated world of the video's anticipated reception. This focus on domestic performance and media production calls to mind Mary Celeste Kearney's emphasis on bedrooms as "productive spaces" (2007), though Kidz Bop is clearly trying to appropriate the trope of domestic production to elicit even more consumption.

The video's structure models the song structure, such that the bedroom and nightclub settings correlate with the song's verse and chorus. Insofar as the nightclub represents unattainable fantasy, the narrative structure of the video provides affective guidance for musical listening: the breakthrough from mundane domesticity into fantastic public performance is correlated with the musical breakthrough into the affective release of a hook—per Adorno, the site of musical fetishism.

Razor & Tie's marketing literature claims that the Kidz Bop brand is popular with boys as well as girls and also is "geographically diverse throughout the continental US" (notably it does not claim to be ethnically diverse). That Kidz Bop markets its product generically to boys and girls is notable, especially because gender identities are already articulated through expressive practices by the time a child reaches Kidz Bop's target age. Kidz Bop, by presenting music only from the current top-forty charts, reproduces the generic naturalness of mainstream top-forty "pop." As Minks demonstrates in her study of urban, northeastern fifth-graders (1999), the same top-forty music provides a shared cultural arena through which an ethnically diverse group of children can claim a collective peer identity (though one that sets up white middle-class American tastes as the comfortable, if exclusive, center).

The individual musical practices portrayed in this video subtly but clearly articulate gendered roles for popular music production and consumption. While the sister sings and dances for the camera, the brother takes responsibility for the stuffed animal band, animating the toys like puppets in the bedroom, and "managing" from backstage in the fantasy performance. Such a division conforms to Lucy Green's (1997) argument that children are taught early to express gendered musical roles along a continuum of uses of technology—where singing and embodied performance associate with femininity while instrumental performance and digital music production mark musical masculinity. While the brother claims management and planning as his arena, the sister's body is at stake, and subtly sexualized. As Simon Frith (1998) emphasizes the performative embodiment of celebrity singers, we see in this video the gendered presentation of performance-as-embodiment for children at the age where popular music consumption is becoming a central site for learning about and interactively constructing identities.

The video portrays popular music as a collection of clearly delineated roles. Stuffed animals are cast and named with specific tasks in a conventionalized rock band. The band's manager confidently sits backstage relishing his accomplishment (which is unspecified). Audience members enthusiastically enact caricatured gestures of ecstatic listening: singing along, pumping their fists, and grimacing. The star singer, whose role is in some ways fluid with that of the committed fan in her bedroom, is at the center of this constellation of popular music roles, and she performs the most intricate and subtle repertoire of gestures, expressions, and stances that embody the gendered and sexualized performer's role. These popular musical roles are reified into limited repertoires of practices, and by isolating these repertoires, the video seems to expose the performativity involved in embodying categories of audience, musician, or star. It is not unreasonable to say that there is a certain critical penetration of the images of popular culture here. While gender remains critically unproblematized among this list of performed roles, age is interestingly portrayed. Tweens are not represented with age-specific markers of behavior or identity (as adolescents might once have been denoted with cigarettes or letterman jackets). Rather, the fantasy nightclub of the video mixes markers of childhood and adulthood, where stuffed animals are the musicians in a darkened nightclub. Kidz Bop triangulates tweens as the negative ground between "Elmo" and "Eminem," as simultaneously both and neither child

and adult, in which children need not distance themselves from the trappings of childhood to engage their desire for legitimate peripheral consumption.

In a very real sense, this video presents models of behavior for children to observe, interrogate, and reproduce in their continuous socialization as participants in public culture. But in practice, these roles are inaccessible to them outside of the specific fantasy portrayed in the video. Rather than socializing kids into popular cultural participation, this video might be better understood as socializing children as "tweens," a public group identity clearly and structurally separate from adults and from a mainstream popular center. The fantasy of celebrity performance both separates tween marginality from adult culture while situating desire for the images and experience of that culture at the core of tween popular music consumption. This video presents tweens to themselves, as an audience of outsiders looking into a (partially imagined) world of adult practices. This marginal tween gaze is canonically situated in the bedroom, performing in front of a mirror—a trope that may be shifting, now, to the video camera or web cam. The home video camera here, and the imagined, mediated, and displaced environment of reception via the Internet, provide a nice twist that encourages the narrative conceit of the fantasy nightclub, but in the end the result is the same: in the privacy and domesticity of the bedroom, tweens present themselves to themselves as publicly constituted persons.

The contradictions of marginality—simultaneous separation from and dependence on the adult center—as pre-adolescents are inducted into public popular consumption highlight the central trope of tween practice as it is constructed in this rapidly expanding music market: the performance of public, commercial personhood in private settings. In this, the tween market exists on the same periphery in the culture industries as tweens themselves do in homes, schools, and communities—one in which children are constantly making use of adult practices from the vantage of their own marginal position in public culture, in the peripheral spaces of bedrooms, playgrounds, and schools.

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The video can be viewed at <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y-z3OL94isk>

>>> [back to Consumers, Commodities & Consumption, Vol. 10\(1\) December 2008.](#)